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ABSTRACT

An examination of language arts instruction for the elementary school child, this paper reviews the failures of traditional methods of teaching grammar to develop language competence. As an alternative, the author proposes the oral method, which focuses upon student-centered interaction situations. Such situations would provide the student with opportunities to develop and strengthen his language performance skills through self-motivating and group activities. Using this approach, the teacher would establish an environment which stimulates child discourse. Thus, the elementary classroom would be changed from a teacher-dominated environment of listeners to a dynamic verbal environment in which children explore their language by using it.
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The Challenge of Speech Communication in
The Elementary Classroom

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These are exciting times for teaching language to elementary school children, for revolutionary thought is seeping down to the classroom in the slow process of applying research findings. If we assume a ten-year lag between significant pedagogical discoveries and wide-spread classroom application, 1973 should mark the beginning of oral communication as the dominant method of teaching the language arts to children.

In 1963 Walter Loban, an education professor at the University of California at Berkeley, reported that "competence in the spoken language appears to be a necessary base for competence in writing and reading." Based upon his eleven year longitudinal study of 338 children, Loban concluded that teaching English grammar was not a fruitful method of developing language competence in elementary school children. He maintained that it is "not basic sentence pattern, but what is done to achieve flexibility within pattern that proves to be a measure of proficiency with language at this level."

Instead of grammar lessons, children need "many opportunities to grapple with their own thought in situations where they have someone to whom they wish to communicate successfully." In light of these findings, Loban asserted that "it would be difficult not to conclude that instruction can yet do more than it has with oral language."¹

A speech educator could hardly have fabricated a happier discovery for his field. While the literature of teaching methods in the language arts continually restated the importance of speech, reading and writing were still considered the central classroom activities. As recently as 1960

speech educators were concerned with "dispelling the latent fear" that elementary speech activities were unimportant and "a frill."

Today, English teachers advise us that "the power of verbal interaction to develop thought and speech is so important" that every school must make room for it "whatever the effort requires."² Education professors are joining speech communication teachers in advocating that communication become the focus of all elementary education.³

Exploring Language Through Speech

The landmark writings of linguist Noam Chomsky led to educational research which established widespread academic acceptance of the idea that children enter school with certain linguistic competencies. Consequently, language education should focus on the "use of language in meaningful situations rather than in any intellectual discussion on sentence structure."⁴ To be sure, a decade earlier Charles Van Riper and Katharine Butler had urged that "children need more than the opportunity to develop speech skills. They need to experiment with actual speech experiences." But Van Riper and Butler's common sense approach lacked the linguistic rationale and research which developed in the 1960's.⁵ The current view of speech in the language arts program is probably best expressed by Beverly Lusty Hendricks: "An ideal speech program would acknowledge the child's inherent language competence and provide opportunities for the child to enhance his language performance skills through a wide variety of self-motivating and group activities."⁶

According to this point of view, children should have the freedom to explore their language as they learn inductively, rather than being taught deductively from "rules of grammar" or "rules for speaking." Communication feedback will assist children in developing language skills as they converse in purposeful discussions.

The writings of James Moffett probably promote this new approach to language instruction more persuasively than any scholarly article on linguistics or speech. An undoctored educator and former secondary English teacher, Moffett proposes a communication-oriented approach to teaching the language arts. As Karl Wallace has noted, Moffett's book, Teaching the Universe of Discourse and his two curriculum handbooks "will delight any teacher of speech."⁷ His primary vehicles for developing oral language are discussion and creative dramatics. He sees truly small group discussion (six children) as the only practical method of providing "individual students enough language experience and feedback." He wants to turn such discussions into "a sensitive learning method."⁸

Hard as it is to believe, his curriculum handbooks are exciting, giving suggestive and imaginative examples of how his student-centered approach can be employed in place of teacher-centered, prescriptive instruction. Purposeful, motivated interaction in heterogeneous groups is the key to Moffett's oral language teaching method. Children are not told how to speak; they discover what works themselves. They are not asked to deliver a prepared speech; they are guided to address each other informally on topics that concern them.

Ideally, student discussion groups would include children from different socioeconomic, ethnic and social dialect backgrounds. Instead of attempting to eradicate dialects, the language arts program would seek to give children an opportunity to learn how to communicate across cultural differences.

The not insignificant task of the teacher is to establish the controlled environment which makes such child discourse possible. In reviewing actual applications of his suggested exercises, Moffett observes that "the thrust of dramatic work and small-group discussion was toward effective interaction. Attending closely to the speech of others and responding relevantly to it were made basic to topic-centered talk and were naturally practiced in dramatic activities."⁹

The Classroom Reality

Language learning through child-talk is impeded by teachers, textbooks and teacher training. Studies of classroom communication reveal that "student-talk" only occurs from 27 to 39 percent of the time. The teacher is talking 47 to 52 percent of the time, and silence occupies 15 to 25 percent of the time. Since approximately 30 children must share the "student-talk" time, a child might actually speak during only 1 percent of his classroom hours.¹⁰

Teachers' reluctance to expand "student-talk" is understandable. "Student-talking" activities are more difficult to structure and conduct than silent or "teacher-talking" activities. Elementary school teachers attending

workshops in speech education at Pennsylvania State University expressed three mutually contradictory reasons for slighting oral communication instruction:

1. Speech development is already complete before the child enters the classroom.
2. Speech will develop along with other subjects.
3. Speech is part of special education and hence is the responsibility of the speech therapist.¹¹

The language arts texts written for elementary school offer little encouragement to the teacher to institute an oral communication approach to language arts. Kenneth L. Brown analyzed fifty-four such texts for grades 3-6 published from 1954 to 1964 as well as their teacher manuals. Virtually all the authors paid lip service to the primacy of oral language. Nevertheless, the actual emphasis in the books did not support the authors' assertions. Only about 10 percent of the lessons stressed speech and only about 0.6 percent stressed listening. Brown found that the speech and listening instruction was prescriptive, failed to treat communication as a process, and emphasized delivery and courtesy rather than message content.

The "principles" of speaking in the texts included such admonitions as: stand straight, hold your hands at your side, and speak clearly. Advice on listening centered on politeness, sitting quietly, and clearing the top of the desks. It hardly needs to be added that these texts do not promote spontaneity or creativity in speech.¹²

Hopefully, the undergraduate elementary education major has read Moffett's excellent books on teaching the language arts, but if he looks for

more specific information on speech education he encounters a paucity of sophisticated methodological guides. Most of the methods texts neither present classroom speech as a communication process nor treat speech activities as an integral part of language exploration.¹³

Carrie Rasmussen's Speech Methods in the Elementary Classroom (1949)¹⁴ approaches speech education deductively and in isolation from other language learning, while Donald H. Ecroyd's Speech in the Classroom (1969)¹⁵ centers on the teacher's speech, not the students'. Even Van Riper and Butler's text Speech in the Elementary Classroom (1955) assumes that the real goal of speech instruction is to enforce "good speech"; the authors observe that "the child with a cleft palate or a peculiar voice can . . . be a thorn in a teacher's side."¹⁶

The speech text which the future elementary school teacher needs to read is Gerald M. Phillips and his associates' volume, The Development of Oral Communication in the Classroom (1970).¹⁷ This work "makes every other book on the topic of 'speech education in the elementary school' out of date"¹⁸ because it reflects an appreciation of recent linguistic research and has a communication orientation to classroom instruction.

Clearly, it is not a question of whether speech educators should be involved in the elementary language arts instruction, but where we should begin.

Implications for Speech Educators

A student-centered speech approach to the language arts cannot be

instituted without: 1) developing a sequence of instructional objectives; and 2) changing the overall mode of teaching and communicating in our elementary classrooms. The speech profession's involvement in elementary education should include extensive observation of class sessions (especially in schools not near colleges), research in language development, and active participation in the education of elementary teachers.

For an oral language curriculum to make sense it should: 1) specify speech and listening abilities which are appropriate for the child's age and language community; 2) expand the child's language skill "in ways related to the natural development of language competency"; and 3) be carried out in the total school program.¹⁹ Professor Barbara Sundene Wood is highly critical of texts which advocate oral language activities without relating them to specific stages of development of children's language code. The primary implication of her bench mark article on psycholinguistics and elementary speech education is that we must know much more about the "developmental stages of grammar" before we can scientifically plan our language objectives.²⁰

Professor Robert W. Hopper of the University of Texas argues persuasively that we should be concerned with more than linguistic competence and consider the child's developing functional or pragmatic language competence in establishing and meeting our instructional objectives in speech. His research with pre-school children indicates that even with three and four year olds the major differences are "not in how much grammar the child knows but in ways he can put to use what he knows in a

functionally appropriate manner."²¹ Again the crucial problem is the lack of knowledge about when children are able to acquire certain language functions. Hopper notes that if we acquired such information, it could form the basis of a developmental language education program.²²

But what is the role of the speech educator who is not also a psycholinguist or sociolinguist? While language researchers explore the pattern of language development, language arts continue to be taught at the elementary level. Speech educators cannot ignore elementary school speech education while waiting for the language development experts to complete their research. Working in close cooperation with language educators, creative dramatics specialists and elementary school teachers, speech educators can develop a sequential speech curriculum consistent with recent language research findings and focusing on the interaction of students in purposeful communication situations.²³

More importantly, speech educators can take an active role in restructuring the elementary classroom, changing it from a teacher-dominated community of child listeners to a dynamic verbal community where children explore their language by using it.

Speech departments can make a unique contribution to the education of teachers through speech courses, in-service training sessions and units of instruction within educational methodology courses which stress the process of communication in education. A sophisticated understanding of communication is essential if teachers are going to stop viewing themselves as adults who tell children what to learn and to start seeing their role as to

help students learn from each other.

There is evidence that teachers and education students are interested in learning more about speech communication as it relates to classroom instruction.²⁴ However, relatively little is being done in this area. A survey of over 500 major teacher training institutions revealed only 122 colleges and universities offering courses in speech for classroom teachers. Moreover, the least emphasized course objective was "to promote study of the relationships between communication and the instructional response."²⁵

Encouraging results, however, have been reported on NDEA workshops for elementary language arts teachers conducted by speech educators at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle and Pennsylvania State University.²⁶ Such classes should become a normal part of teacher education and in-service training, not just special projects.

English teachers as well as speech educators have recognized the significance of communication in the classroom. Authorities on language arts education in both the United Kingdom and the United States are convinced that the English teacher "has to learn for himself and develop with his pupils the full potentials of discussion methods."²⁷ This recommendation grew out of the important Anglo-American Seminar on the Teaching of English held at Dartmouth College in the summer of 1966. Unfortunately, the issues raised by the Dartmouth Conference remain "remote to most teachers of English."²⁸ Professor J. Jeffery Auer, one of two speech participants at the conference, recently observed: "the plain fact of the matter is that no one, at home or at school, much cares about teaching

young children anything about the creativity or even the utility of oral discourse. "29

The jump into elementary speech education will be a shock to those of us whose research has revolved around the speeches of nineteenth century American orators, or the behavior of debate judges. Nevertheless, we must devote more attention to early speech education if we are to avoid what Professor Frederick Williams slyly refers to as the "tyranny of irrelevance. "30

Footnotes

¹Walter Loban, The Language of Elementary School Children, NCTE Research Report No. 1 (Champaign, Ill.: National Council of Teachers of English, 1963), p. 88.

²Marcella Cberle, "A Contemporary View of Elementary Speech Education," Speech Teacher, 9 (Nov. 1960), 270; and James Moffett, A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13: A Handbook for Teachers (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), p. 53.

³Margaret Ammons, "Communication: A Curriculum Focus," in Elementary School Curriculum: An Anthology of Trends and Challenges, ed. by Michael Palardy (N. Y.: Macmillan Company, 1971), pp. 23-38; Gary N. Gipson, "A Re-evaluation of Formal Educational Systems," paper presented at the 1971 meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Francisco (available from the author, Dept. of Speech, Indiana University); and Gerald M. Phillips, "The Oral Communication Revolution," in Dimensions of Oral Communication Instruction: Readings in Speech Education, ed. by Keith Erickson (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Company Publishers, 1970), pp. 257-270.

⁴Eldonna L. Evertts, "Practical Implications of Recent Research in Language for Elementary Teachers," Proceedings, Speech Communication Association Summer Conference VI (1970), p. 150. Also see Beverly Lusty Hendricks, "The Move to Power: A Philosophy of Elementary

Speech Education, "Speech Teacher, 19 (Sept. 1970), p. 152.

⁵Charles Van Riper and Katharine G. Butler, Speech in the Elementary Classroom (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1955), p. 38.

⁶Hendricks, "The Move to Power," p. 151.

⁷Karl R. Wallace, "The Language Arts Program in the Schools," Speech Teacher, 18 (Sept. 1969), p. 236. All three of Moffett's books were published by Houghton Mifflin Company in 1968. The second handbook is entitled A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-6: A Handbook for Teachers.

⁸Moffett, A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13, p. 12.

⁹Moffett, A Student-Centered Language Arts Curriculum, Grades K-13, p. 267.

¹⁰Kenneth L. Brown, "Implications of Communication Theory for Speech Communication in the Elementary School: A Response," Proceedings, SCA Summer Conference VI, 1970, p. 139.

¹¹Gerald M. Phillips, Robert E. Dunham, Robert Brubaker, and David Butt, The Development of Oral Communication in the Classroom (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill Company, 1970), p. 26.

¹²Kenneth L. Brown, "Speech and Listening in Language Arts Text-

books: Part I, "Elementary English, 44 (April 1967), pp. 336-341, and Kenneth L. Brown, "Speech and Listening in Language Arts Textbooks: Part II, "Elementary English, 44 (May 1967), pp. 461-465, 467.

¹³For examples of the prescriptive approach to speech training outlined in language arts teaching methodology texts see Willard F. Tidyman and Maruerita Butterfield, Teaching the Language Arts (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1959), p. 39; and Walter T. Petty, The Language Arts in Elementary Schools (Washington, D.C.: The Center for Applied Research in Education, 1962), pp. 24, 30.

¹⁴(New York: Ronald Press, 1949), p. 14.

¹⁵2nd ed. (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, Inc., 1969).

¹⁶p. ix.

¹⁷Gerald M. Phillips, et. al., The Development of Oral Communication in the Classroom. For another encouraging text, see Margaret L. Clark, Ella A. Erway, and Lee Beltzer, The Learning Encounter: The Classroom as a Communications Workshop (N.Y.: Random House, 1971).

¹⁸Allan O. Frank, review of The Development of Oral Communication in the Classroom, Today's Speech, 19 (Winter 1971), p. 70.

¹⁹Donald H. Ecroyd, "Implications of the Four Principle Papers for the Teaching of Rhetoric in the Elementary Schools," Proceedings, SCA

Summer Conference VI, 1970, pp. 122-123.

²⁰Barbara Sundene Wood, "Implications of Psycholinguistics for Elementary Speech Programs," Speech Teacher, 17 (Sept. 1968), p. 192.

²¹Robert W. Hopper, "Expanding the Notion of Competence: Implications for Elementary Speech Programs," Speech Teacher, 20 (Jan. 1971), pp. 33-34.

²²Hopper, "Expanding the Notion of Competence," p. 35. Professor Wood has also noted the importance of function in language competence; see Wood, "Implications of Recent Research in Child Communication Development for Speech Communication Education," Proceedings, SCA Summer Conference VI, 1970, p. 20. Also of interest should be Robert W. Hopper and Rita C. Naremore, Children's Speech: A Practical Introduction to Communication Development (N. Y.: Harper and Row, forthcoming, 1972).

²³Phillips, et. al., The Development of Oral Communication, offers a tentative curriculum plan being developed for Pennsylvania schools (pp. 63-71).

²⁴For example, at the University of Kansas the interpersonal communication course offered in the Department of Speech and Drama was rated the most popular of the courses required by that university's School of Education; Kim Giffin and Bobby R. Patton, Instructor's Manual to

Accompany Fundamentals of Interpersonal Communication (N. Y.: Harper and Row, 1971), p. vii. Also see Don M. Boileau, "Speech Curriculum Interests of Elementary School Teachers," paper presented at the 1971 meeting of the Speech Communication Association, San Francisco (available from the author, Dept. of Speech, University of Oregon).

²⁵Brown, "Implications of Communication Theory for Speech Communication in the Elementary School," p. 141.

²⁶See Beverly L. Lusty and Barbara Sundene Wood, "Effects of an NDEA Institute upon Attitudes of Inner-City Elementary Teachers," Speech Teacher, 18 (Sept. 1969), pp. 217-222; and Phillips, et. al., The Development of Oral Communication.

²⁷John Dixon, Growth Through English: A Report on the Dartmouth Seminar 1966, 2nd ed. (London: Oxford University Press, 1969), pp. 111-112.

²⁸John F. Bayliss, "On Dartmouth," Elementary English, 47 (April, 1970), p. 471.

²⁹J. Jeffery Auer, "Introduction," in On Teaching Speech in Elementary and Junior High Schools, ed. by J. Jeffery Auer and Edward B. Jenkinson (Bloomington, Ind.: Indiana University Press, 1971), p. viii.

³⁰Frederick Williams, "Implications of Recent Research in Social Dialects for Speech Communication Education," Proceedings, SCA Summer Conference VI, 1970, p. 36.